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# American Violence: Where Does the Danger Really Come From?

Elizabeth Kandel-Englander

*Bridgewater State College*, [eeenglander@bridgew.edu](mailto:eeenglander@bridgew.edu)

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## AMERICAN VIOLENCE: Where does the danger *really* come from?

Elizabeth Kandel-Englander

Within a few days of the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman, O.J. Simpson was in jail and America was told that the former football star was a wife-abuser. Since that time the case has become a national preoccupation, but it is just the most well-known of our cases of domestic violence — the tip of the iceberg.

On Friday, August 6, 1993, the most popular newspaper in one major U.S. city reported on three murders in the metropolitan area. All three murders were referred to as “domestic” homicides. Two of these homicides involved the murder of women by their husbands; the third case involved the murder of a young woman by her estranged boyfriend.

There is little doubt that “domestic” murders, once routinely given little or no attention, are now considered to be good newsmakers. However, despite the mass media’s increasing recogni-

(where a gunman calmly shot strangers). Most Americans still believe that the violence which we are most likely to encounter (that is, the majority of American violence) occurs *in our streets*. Women are often taught to defend themselves against street crime; for example, a woman may attend a self-defense class, or may carefully check her car before getting into it at night. When she thinks of being attacked, raped, or beaten, she may typically imagine that the city streets hold the greatest threat.

Actually, a typical American woman is *much* more likely to be assaulted *in her own home* than in the streets of her neighborhood. It’s not only true that American women are assaulted more frequently in their homes than in the streets; in fact, the *leading cause* of injury to American women is from domestic — not street — violence. American citizens, however, are often largely unaware of this fact, although the public’s knowledge about domestic violence is increasing every day.

### WHY DO AMERICANS MISTAKE THE PRIMARY SOURCE OF VIOLENCE?

Some reasons are emotional, and others are informational. Many people find it more painful to acknowledge violence between intimate and supposedly loving people than to acknowledge random violence between strangers. Somehow, violence between strangers “makes more sense,” while violence between family members seems illogical. The once-strong image of the American family has undergone so much weakening that any further assault — even if it is a truthful assault — is doubly painful. In other words, maybe we don’t understand how much violence is in American families because we don’t *want* to understand it.

At least part of the reason, however, also lies in the mass media that we are



tion of the toll (and frequency) of domestic violence, “street” violence still sells the most papers. Compare the attention given the three homicides above — all occurring in one day — to the attention given the four homicides on the Long Island commuter train



## How Common is Child Abuse?

Depending on how the numbers are tabulated, our knowledge of how common family violence is can be affected greatly. A perfect example is the case of child abuse. How common is child abuse? How many children are abused in the United States every year? The answer depends, as usual, on how you ask the question.

In 1980, the National Incidence Study was conducted by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. In order to count the number of abused children, the NIS study requested information from child protective services (state or local authorities who had detected child abuse), public schools, mental health centers, hospitals, and police and correctional agencies. In other words, the NIS study went to great lengths to count every case of detected and officially counted child abuse.

The NIS estimated that during 1980, 625,000 American children were neglected or abused.

In contrast, in 1975 the National Family Violence Survey attempted to count the number of abused children by surveying households directly for the presence of abuse. This was a self-report survey, meaning that the researchers were interested in counting all abused children, rather than counting only those abused children who were detected by doctors, teachers, or other authorities. Based on interviews with more than 2,000 households, the researchers estimated that 1,700,000 children were abused in the United States annually — fully 1,100,000 more children than the NIS counted five years later (in 1980).

exposed to every day. Most Americans get their information about crime from their government and the mass media. Thus, some of the public's misconceptions about the frequency of domestic violence can be traced to the way in which the government compiles, and releases, statistics about violent crime. While official statistics about domestic violence are absolutely *not* a deliberate attempt to mislead the public, they can be easily misinterpreted.

Basically, the government gets its information about the frequency of street, versus domestic, violence from two different sources: first, police reports of arrests and convictions, and second, statistics based on government surveys of victims of crime.

### THE UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS

In the U.S., all police reports of crimes are compiled into one report which is released each year by the FBI. This report is called the *Uniform Crime Reports* (UCR). In theory, local police know about all the crime in their jurisdiction, record all the crime, and send these records to the FBI. However, in reality, we know that the UCR is only an *estimate* because there are several steps in this process which may fail.

First, we all know that, especially in urban areas, the local police are rarely (if ever) able to detect *all* crime which occurs in their jurisdiction. Many crimes are never reported to the police, or go simply unnoticed. Importantly, domestic violence is often a hidden crime, which police know little or nothing about. Second, for a variety of reasons, local police probably fail to officially record all the crime which they do detect. Again, domestic violence is a crime in which, until very recently, police typically merely mediated the dispute between spouses (even if it was clearly violent), rather than officially recording it.

For some crimes, the UCR is an excellent source. It is particularly good at expressing the true frequency of crimes which are often both detected and recorded by police — for example, house burglaries. Unfortunately, in the case of domestic violence, the crime is often not detected by police and if detected may not be recorded. The UCR is considered, despite these shortcomings, to be the “official” crime statistic of the country. Because of its “style,” however, you can see that it will reflect a lot of violent street crime, but very little violent domestic crime. Americans see little domestic violence reported in the media and by the government, therefore, they conclude that very little domestic violence exists, and that the major threat of violent victimization is from the streets.

### NATIONAL CRIME SURVEY

The federal government recognizes that there are shortcomings to the UCR. As a result, it has started to measure crime in a different way, using a survey called the *National Crime Survey* (NCS). Rather than counting the criminals, as the UCR does, the NCS counts the victims. The NCS is a large-scale survey which asks Americans about their criminal victimization experiences; by counting the victims instead of the criminals, it avoids restricting itself to detected and reported crime. Presumably, victims will report their criminal victimization experiences, even if the crime was never reported to the police or even if the criminal was never caught.

The NCS was a very important step in learning more about American violence. Unfortunately, it's still a less than ideal tool in learning about the true frequency of domestic violence. Why *can't* we just count victims of family violence, and thereby find out how common it really is?

Pretend for a moment that you are a wife whose husband punches her in



the face when she doesn't prepare dinner quickly enough. The phone rings, and an interviewer asks you if you have ever been the victim of a violent crime. You think for a minute, but can't think of any time you have been raped or mugged, so you reply, "no." The truth is, most victims of domestic violence

they are at fault for the failure of the relationship, and as such, they may be motivated to conceal the crime. Their dependence on their partners (including financial dependence) may also motivate them to remain silent, even in the face of what may be truly brutal violence.



### **NATIONAL FAMILY VIOLENCE SURVEYS**

In the last two decades, the first really accurate data has appeared about how common domestic violence is. A group of researchers took matters into their own hands and decided to fashion a new way to

figure out exactly how common family violence really is. The result was a series of surveys called the National Family Violence Surveys (conducted first in 1975, in 1985, and soon to be conducted again).

These surveys use interviews of thousands of ordinary Americans. It is not the topic of the interview which is unique, but rather the way in which the interviews are conducted which has revealed to Americans, for the first time, exactly how frequent family violence is. For one thing, these surveys don't rely on only victims or only criminals — they ask both parties to report family violence. Also, the interviewer doesn't ask people about "assault" or "violent crime." Instead, the interviewer asks people how they resolve their family conflicts. The person who is being interviewed is given a long list of possible ways in which he or she resolves conflicts, and merely picks the correct answers. This makes the process much less threatening and also much more specific. There are ap-

parently many victims who are not willing to state that their spouses "beat" them but are willing to admit that their spouses slap them during conflicts.

It's because of these newer research techniques that Americans are beginning to understand how common family violence really is. Experts in this area now know that violence is much more likely to occur between family members or between people who know each other than between total strangers. Of course, street violence is increasing in our society and it remains a serious menace. Despite my professional knowledge about domestic violence, I probably fear street crime as much as most American women. However, awareness of the seriousness of domestic violence is beginning to filter down to the American public. We must be committed to stopping violence in *all* its forms — not just on the streets.



Elizabeth  
Kandel-Englander  
is Assistant  
Professor of  
Psychology.

PHOTO: GALAXY STUDIOS

don't understand that they are actually the victims of a *violent crime*. This wife may be ashamed of her husband's aggressiveness, and she probably knows that it's socially unacceptable to punch her face, but she may very well be totally unaware of the fact that punching someone's face — even your wife's — is *assault*.

Maybe this woman does know, though, that it is assault to punch someone. Maybe she is well aware that if anyone finds out about the violence, her abusive husband will be taken off to jail, and maybe even kept there. Even so, she may not admit to the interviewer that she has been the victim of an abusive husband. For one, she may want to protect her husband, and may fear that telling anyone will get him in trouble. In addition, she may be intensely ashamed of the crime; in her desire to pretend that her marriage is normal and loving, she lies about the violence, even to an anonymous telephone interviewer.

Unfortunately, female victims of domestic violence often believe that